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SUBJECT: UNION LEADER: CONSERVATIVE VICTORY NO DISASTER

¶1. (SBU) The UK's trade unions are preparing for the possibility of a Conservative government, but are not yet ready to predict a certain and convincing Tory victory, Brendan Barber, head of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) told the Ambassador during a December 9 meeting. Noting that recent polls showed a narrowing of the Conservatives' lead, Barber said that voters were fatigued with the entire political process, and David Cameron has been unconvincing in demonstrating that he was the best person to lead the UK.

¶2. (SBU) If the Tories were to win, trade unions do not expect a return to the Thatcherite days of hostility to labor, when she called unions the "enemies from within," stated Barber. Cameron, in contrast, has publicly stated that he wanted a sensible relation with the unions, that he did not have an anti-union basis. Barber stated that the Tories have actually been "courting" the unions a bit, because they know they would need union support in any effort to reduce public sector employment as a deficit-fighting measure. If the election were to result in a hung parliament, the union movement might actually be in the strongest political position, since all three parties would need its support, stated Barber. He predicted a small Conservative majority as the most likely outcome of the election.

¶3. (SBU) When asked whether he thought elections would be called in March, rather than May, as has been rumored in some circles, Barber viewed this as highly unlikely. The Labour government will announce its budget in March, and will want to use that budget to draw a clear dividing line between its policies and those of the Conservatives. With the economy starting to show signs of recovery, Labour would also want a few more months of positive news before calling the elections.

¶4. (SBU) Background on Barber and the Trades Union Congress. Barber is General Secretary of the TUC, with 58 affiliated unions representing approximately seven million members, many of whom work in the public sector. Barber acknowledged that membership has "taken a dive" this year, primarily because of the private and public sector layoffs. While there is no formal link between the TUC and the Labour Party, fifteen trade unions are affiliated to the Labour Party, and provide a major share of Labour's funding, amounting to GBP 3.2 million, 73 percent of overall funding, in the second quarter of 2009.

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